

Early history of the Epagneul Breton

One of the first historians of the Epagneul Breton who recorded some of the early history of the breed was Mr. R. de Kermadec. In the 1940s Mr. Kermadec wrote the following about one story passed down about the early origins of the breed. This information was passed along by word of mouth and represents some of the folklore of our storied breed history:

“After the fall of the Roman Empire, the peninsular region of Brittany was completely depopulated by the barbarians and repopulated by the Celtic elements who notably came from Wales when the Saxons invaded Great Britain.” He notes that they brought several animals, including a Spaniel Dog, which was still found in Brittany many years later. Mr. R. de Kermadec also wrote, “A little over 40 years ago (circa 1900), the Brittany Spaniel used mostly for woodcock hunting, behaved and acted almost like a Springer. I have an old friend, a native of Wales, who has often told me that the Spaniels native to his country are identically the same as our old orange and white Brittany Spaniels. They are two varieties of the same breed, one of which (the Brittany) has been slightly modified by a cross with an English Setter female, to give it some staunchness on point and a little more height.”



“Old hunter of Brittany and his dog”

This English Setter-Brittany Spaniel cross, so prosaically stated above, was amplified in a more romantic version of how this was accomplished. In this account, Mr. R. de Kermadec relates that the Viscount de Pontavice, a great hunter and setter man, had a kennel on his estate near Fougères. He was courting a lady living in the woods in the region of Côtes du Nord. One of his gamekeepers, named Lulzac, owned and was quite proud of a number of native Spaniels. The English Setters of Pontavice were of a small and short type with a white coat and large orange spots.

“Was Lulzac the only witness,” asks Mr. R. de Kermadec, “or the instigator of the breeding which united one of the native studs with the English Setter bitch belonging to

his master?” Only one pup whelped, a bitch with a naturally short tail, white and orange in color. She was so interesting that there was no hesitation to breed her to a native white and brown spaniel. The resulting litter was so satisfactory that the inveterate setter man, Pontavice, almost completely gave up his English dogs for the young prodigy having the advantages of the two races from which they issued.... Arthur Enaud, who was “passioned for the English dogs, after seeing the bitch of Pontavice’s hunting, gave up his idols and later helped create the Club of the Breton Spaniel.”

And so when the many accounts are totaled, one final fact shows clear through the foggy past. The Brittany Spaniel developed with the people of Brittany, and like the people, his final form was the result of local conditions and outside influences. However, the form was not constant. There was no standard – no conformity of appearance. L’Epagneuls Breton, at the end of this romantic era, were simply dogs of somewhat the same appearance, well-liked by their owners because of their disposition and ability.



A tapestry, the work of Jouy A.M. Lefournier representing the Brittany as it appeared about 1800. This illustrates the French rule of thumb for the height of the Brittany - “50 cm, or knee high to a woman.”

Source: Origin of the Brittany Spaniel, by Fred Z. White, M.D., as reprinted at pages 284-286 in The Book of the American Brittany, by Nicky Bissell published in Omaha, NE, by the American Brittany Club (copyright 1986).